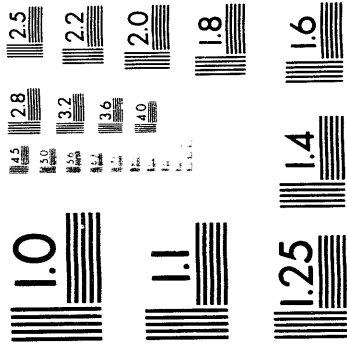
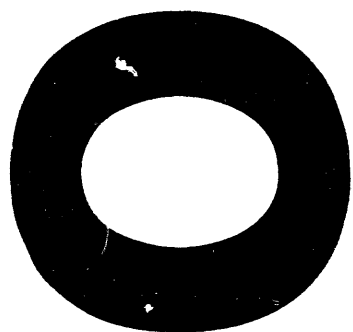
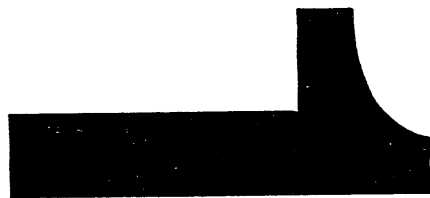






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ORGANIZING FOR PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN FERNALD DECISION-MAKING

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ORGANIZING FOR PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN FERNALD DECISION MAKING

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ABSTRACT

Fernald is returning to the basics of interpersonal communication as a cornerstone of its public involvement program. The guiding premise behind this concept is the belief that face-to-face interaction between people is more likely to build trust and confidence than public meetings, news releases and other traditional public information techniques. A network of project spokespersons, called "envoys," is being organized to develop person-to-person relationships with people interested in the future of Fernald. To support this approach, public affairs personnel are adopting roles as management consultants and communications coaches in addition to serving in their traditional role as public information specialists. Early observations seem to show signs of improvement in the level of public trust in Fernald decision-makers.

INTRODUCTION

Effective public involvement is invisible and person-to-person. Much of what is called public involvement is actually a symptom of not having public trust and confidence. Public meetings, news releases, videotapes, exhibits -- none of these, by themselves, are likely to significantly increase the level of trust. Rather, what is needed is management making the feelings of members of the public an integral part of its decision-making process. To do that, they must communicate to affected persons directly, one-on-one. At Fernald, we are organizing to do that.

Fernald is a former uranium production facility for the Department of Energy. For more than 30 years, operations at the site neglected environmental protection and industrial hygiene. Although there is no scientific or epidemiological assessment that can show that actual harm was done to nearby residents or former workers, the court of public opinion ruled that the harm had been done. Public outrage, bad press and lawsuits resulted.

Fernald is rapidly approaching a critical period in the formal decision-making process. Regulatory documents presenting proposed cleanup solutions are now beginning to be presented to regulators and the public. Yet broad public understanding of the decision-making process and trade-offs affecting development of cleanup alternatives appears limited. Equally of concern is the realization that public comment on formal decision-making documents is invited only after proposed solutions have been debated at length between the Department of Energy and its regulators.

Complicating these concerns is the fact that the Department of Energy and its Fernald

contractor face a major credibility problem. This lack of credibility has made people distrustful of any proposals to correct Fernald's problems. In order to take any action, the level of trust between management and the public has to improve.

Unfortunately, traditional public information media do not work especially well at increasing trust. Because people are inundated with information, information products have to be slick to get noticed. But slickness sows the seeds of distrust and incredulity.

People seem to have come to expect a remote, unresponsive government. They anticipate a faceless bureaucracy, with no one they can hold responsible. There is some evidence that although people rely on the mass media to obtain information they do not especially trust it. Our high tech society seems to obstruct intimacy and break down relationships. In reaction, people long for human touch.

Fernald has organized its public involvement program to introduce that human touch. We call it person-to-person public involvement.

THE ORGANIZATION

The organization can be likened to a three-legged stool.

Leg one is the public information staff. Leg two is management involvement with the help of public affairs consultants. Leg three is a network of envoys who establish personal relationships with key opinion leaders in the community. We believe that all three of these legs must be in place to earn public confidence.

Leg One: Public Information

When people think of public involvement, they often think of public meetings, brochures, video production, and displays. These are elements of a good public information program, but they are only one leg of the public involvement stool. At Fernald, as at most institutions, it is the strongest and most well developed leg. It is the leg most exercised by managers who have grown accustomed to the convenience of one-way communication that a strong public information program provides. Do not imagine, however, that this alone established a good public involvement program.

Leg Two: Management Involvement

Public involvement starts to become a reality when managers accept it as their responsibility and make it a regular part of their decision-making process*. That process has the following steps:

* This decision-making process is a paraphrase of concepts articulated by Jim Creighton, Creighton & Creighton, Inc., P.O. Box 1030, Los Gatos, CA, 95030.

1. Identify actions likely to affect others.
2. Identify the persons likely to be affected.
3. Speak to them to ensure they understand the problem you are trying to solve and you understand their concerns. It is also useful to get agreement on the criteria for what would constitute a solution to the problem. It may be different than previously thought.
4. Identify a set of alternatives that show different ways of taking action. Every person affected should be able to see at least one alternative that includes measures to protect their interests.
5. Make sure the persons affected understand the alternatives and can see how at least one of the alternatives clearly addresses their concerns.
6. Compare the alternatives and refine them. Show the effects of each alternative on everyone's concerns.
7. Give all the affected parties an opportunity to say whether they think the alternatives have been described and evaluated accurately and fairly. Change the alternatives if new information warrants.
8. Make and implement your decision.
9. Continuously reevaluate your progress using these same steps.

This may seem a long and complicated process. Sometimes it can be. For large projects it may take many studies, a citizens advisory group, and several years. For other projects, it may only mean a meeting and a few phone calls. The important thing is to make it a natural way of doing things. It will save time and money in the long run.

When management becomes involved in this way, the public involvement stool becomes much stronger. The first leg of the stool, public information, starts to become more effective and meaningful to the public. But it is the third leg that really creates a stable program.

Leg Three: Person-to-person Communication

The last leg of public involvement is person-to-person communication. This is communication through personal relationships between site employees and members of the public.

Our society is overwhelmed with information. Most people are bombarded day and night by information, most of it irrelevant, self-serving, or just plain false.

People tend to trust someone they know over a newspaper article or television show. In most American communities, even big cities, there is a relatively small group of opinion leaders. Reporters routinely turn to these opinion leaders as sources when they write their stories. The opinion leaders reflect the values of a group of people who share a common interest. If their concerns are addressed before a decision is made, the decision will rarely be controversial or overturned.

At Fernald, we are designating employees to act as site representatives with opinion leaders and groups. We call them envoys. It is their job to cultivate a relationship with one or more opinion leaders. In many cases, this can be a natural development of existing relationships.

For instance, the Fernald fire chief already has business contacts with the fire chiefs and other emergency management people in the surrounding community. The envoy concept takes advantage of the relationship by making the fire chief the representative to the opinion group he is already contacting. After all, this opinion group will naturally turn to this Fernald employee for information about site activities and related issues. Making that person an envoy merely recognizes that relationship and helps ensure that the envoy has complete, current, and accurate information. Public Affairs staff gathers that information. The envoys need only tap into it.

In addition to providing information, the envoy can carry messages to and from that group. In this way, the envoys can also bring to management a much better understanding of the concerns the public has.

The fire chief is just one example of how an envoy might be recruited. Thirty or so envoys make a powerful communication tool. With envoys, public meetings become less important than one-on-ones. Public meetings begin to serve as group affirmations of understandings reached through person-to-person contacts. Brochures or facts sheets become calling cards to reinforce messages the envoys deliver.

These envoy relationships take some time to develop so they should not be replaced or changed often. It may take six months to develop a relationship. The envoys must also be brought together and given direct contact with decision making managers. It is the only way that their voices will be authentic when they communicate with their opinion groups.

INFRASTRUCTURE

To support the envoy network, Public Affairs staff has changed the way it functions within the Fernald organization. Fundamental to this change was action taken to bring Public Affairs personnel closer to decision-makers.

With the change in contractor management at Fernald in December, 1992, a new approach to deploying public affairs resources was introduced. Upon its arrival, the Fernald Environmental Restoration Management Corporation established a matrix management organization typical of major engineering and construction projects. Consistent with this approach, a Public Affairs staff member was assigned to each of the major projects at the site to begin functioning as a member of the project team. This brought Public Affairs personnel into day-to-day interaction with technical managers and staff throughout the organization.

This modest step has tremendous significance for Fernald's public involvement program for several reasons.

Access to current information about Fernald on a "real time" basis is essential for envoys to represent the project well. In its traditional public information function, the Public Affairs office serves as the clearinghouse for current information about Fernald. "Matrixing" Public Affairs staff onto technical project teams has greatly enhanced its information gathering capability. Coupled with an initiative to establish an electronic "newswire" on the site-wide computer network, this step has provided a means of keeping envoys current about Fernald.

For person-to-person public involvement to help managers make better decisions, Public Affairs staff has to expand its role as adviser to management. Through day-to-day interaction, Public Affairs personnel are identifying problems facing management that should be surfaced for public debate. Public Affairs staff are helping develop specific plans for management to establish dialogue with interested parties. Person-to-person communications are often the starting point for determining the level of public interest in the issue. The decision-making process described earlier can then be followed.

As alternatives are developed and communicated, it is important that feedback from concerned people be acknowledged and used to change direction. Public Affairs personnel can monitor reports from envoys on opinion leaders' reactions to proposed alternatives and advise management on appropriate responses. In this regard, Public Affairs staff serves as the publics' advocates within the organization by reminding management of the need for considering specific measures to demonstrate responsiveness to public concerns and the likelihood of public acceptance of a contemplated course of action.

Asking managers to consult with the public, envoys to build personal relationships, and Public Affairs staff to counsel management is asking a lot. To support these changes, new training programs are being established at Fernald. Nationally renowned trainers will be part of an orientation to person-to-person public involvement concepts for managers and envoys. A management seminar on public participation planning developed by DOE-Headquarters is being sought. A public communications training workshop has been provided for senior managers. A similar workshop is being considered for envoys and selected mid-level managers and technical staff in 1994. Recognizing that demands on Public Affairs staff grow considerably as its role changes, a program for developing professional competencies in counseling and coaching, conflict resolution, communications facilitation, public relations program research, measurement and evaluation and other specialties is in progress.

RESULTS PROMISING SO FAR

The organization we have described has not yet matured. Although it has not been fully implemented we already see signs of improvement in the level of public trust.

One of the most valuable things is that it reduces the media's tendency to polarize people and issues. By talking directly with opinion leaders about issues and problems, they are not outraged by surprising headlines. This in turn tends to reduce bad headlines. In fact, we have begun to see some good headlines. We believe this is because reporters get at least part of their stories from opinion leaders. If those opinion leaders are contented or even pleased with progress it is hard to write a negative story.

The envoy system provides a potentially rapid communication chain. Issues and ideas can be dealt with quickly and management can move ahead with some actions with confidence that they will not be interrupted or halted later by intervention from disgruntled stakeholders, politicians, and lawyers. This is one reason such interaction is useful regardless of where in the regulatory process a cleanup site is. It is never too late to begin person-to-person contacts as a way of involving the public, even if such techniques were not used to establish dialogue earlier in the decision-making process.

The organizational concept seems sound but there are problems. The concept of talking to people face-to-face is an ancient one. Although the concept is ancient, it is not a usual practice. Many people are unwilling to do this kind of relationship building; some are unable. The task of communicating with other human beings is a time-intensive one, and competes with other priorities for those asked to serve as envoys. The task can become complicated when opinion leaders are already outraged, as it can take great patience and tact to establish a personal relationship. There is little in our culture or our educational curriculums that teach and encourage this kind of interaction. So far, however, we have found it well worth the effort to reach out in this way.

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